

## Addressing the challenge of climate change must be done discursively through argument, debate and academic evidence

*Academic evidence should expect to be challenged, particularly when that research partners uncertainty with important social policy issues. Nafees Meah writes that social scientists and their counterparts involved in climate change research must be ready to push forward their evidence and be prepared to defend it.*



I think it is not an overstatement to say that climate change and energy policy would not be where it is today without the huge contribution of academic research on climate change. Indeed, my department, the Department of Energy and Climate Change arguably exists only because of high impact academic research on the science and economics of climate change and how we respond as a society to the challenge.

It is an area where science has a direct impact on government policy. In DECC, we certainly like to think of ourselves as an evidenced based department. It would be odd if that were not the case. I suppose I should explain what my team does in DECC which may go some way to illustrate why engaging with researchers is so important for Government in this area of policy.

My own work is in the Science and Innovation Group in DECC. My team covers three areas: climate science and observations, which sets out the case for action; greenhouse gas inventory, which measures the emissions of GHGs in the UK; and technical energy analysis, which looks at the efficacy of energy efficiency measures as a first step to reducing overall GHG emissions and ensuring energy security.

We in DECC, together with Defra, sponsor the Met Office Hadley Centre – arguably the leading geo-science institute in the world. In the area of climate change, it is imperative that policy making takes account of the still developing knowledge base of how the climate system is responding to increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

To fully appreciate the importance of academic research in Government policy making on climate change one only needs to look to:

- The Climate Change Act 2008 – which was based on our then best understanding of what was happening to the climate system as a result of increasing greenhouse gas emissions. It drew heavily on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 4<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report published in 2007;
- The adoption of the target to limit global temperature rise to 2 degrees by the UNFCCC as being necessary to avoid dangerous climate change. This was informed by worldwide academic research on potential impacts of increasing surface temperatures on agriculture, coastal areas, the Arctic region and other systems;
- The UK Climate Change Risk Assessment and the National Adaptation Programme which are underpinned by climate change research by the Met Office Hadley Centre and the work of the wider NERC climate change research community.

We have recently published our Science and Innovation Strategy. This can be found on the [DECC website](#). One of the key messages from this document is that science, technology and innovation lie at the heart of the transition to a low carbon economy.

Responding to climate change and delivering energy security is not and cannot just be a

scientific/engineering issue – especially if it is likely to involve significant changes in the way we live and do things. It must be stressed that responding to climate change is a social process.

Recognising this important fact, we have amongst other things established a customer insight team in DECC to support policy colleagues to develop and deliver effective policies by understanding customer behaviour, needs, beliefs, experiences and circumstances. Social research and customer insight are key elements, alongside other analytical activities, in providing the evidence base needed to inform departmental strategy, policy making and delivery. We have also established a Social Science Expert Committee consisting of senior UK academics. Its aim is to *improve the impact of DECC and Defra's policies through the more effective production and use of high-quality social science evidence*.

I want to underline the importance of social science and the necessity of having a proper understanding of social transformations and how these happen. We must strongly resist the temptation to say that because the '*science says 'x', you must do 'y'*'. Where science has an important public policy role, as is the case with climate science, then one should expect the scientific evidence to be challenged – especially given the intrinsic uncertainties in predicting the likely consequences of increasing greenhouse gas concentrations on the earth system and on social systems. When this happens, then the most appropriate course of action for scientists and policy makers is to be open and transparent. An important corollary is that scientists also need to be prepared to go out and defend their findings to the public. Addressing the challenge of climate change has to be done discursively through argument and debate as well being informed by evidence.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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